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Investigating Drownings in Australia
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I grew up in Tasmania, Australia's smallest state, an island located in the Southern Ocean. Growing up I was forever in, on, or under the water. I had passing involvement in drowning incidents, such as assisting in the search for survivors from a swamped fishing vessel whilst competing in a tuna fishing competition and considered myself a well-educated water user.

In 2008, I travelled to Canberra in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and joined the Australian Federal Police (AFP). As part of my initial application to the Police, I was required to provide evidence that I was able to demonstrate basic swimming ability, as well as a first aid certificate; however the course did not cover any form of aquatic life saving measures or further first aid training. Whilst I was at the Police College, my closest school friend drowned in a kayaking accident in Canada. In the course of my duties as a Police Officer and later as a member of the Police Dive Team, I attended numerous drowning incidents, however a couple of incidents in particular galvanised me into becoming more involved in drowning prevention and moulded me into a drowning prevention advocate.

In 2012 I was conducting enquiries with a colleague when we heard an urgent call for assistance on the Police radio. A group of young children had been playing in an open spillway after a heavy storm and had been swept into a large pond. The swimming ability of the children varied, and they quickly found themselves in significant danger. Fortunately, an off-duty fireman was walking his dog nearby and swam out to the children, bringing them to shore as I arrived on the scene. It was readily apparent to me that one of the girls had drowned, and had no pulse or signs of life. I immediately commenced CPR whilst radioing for further assistance. I was incredibly fortunate to successfully administer the life saving measures, and signs of life returned. The young girl was flown to hospital in a critical condition but went on to make a full recovery.

Some years later I was assigned an investigation into the drowning of a 20-month-old toddler in the swimming pool at his grandparents' house. In the ACT, deaths that are sudden or unexpected are referred to the Coroner for further investigation. Enquiries in relation to the circumstances surrounding the death are conducted by Police on behalf of the Coroner and may include documenting the scene, speaking with family members and witnesses, collecting medical records, examining any medical procedures undertaken and treatment administered, a forensic examination and a post mortem examination, including toxicology samples. Once the Coroner is in receipt of all of the information, they must make a number of findings. These findings include the identity of the deceased, as well as the cause and manner of their death. If the Coroner identifies a matter of public safety has arisen during the examination, they may elect to hold an inquest and at the conclusion of that inquest, make

recommendations to interested parties. Those parties are under no formal obligation to accept those recommendations in full or in part; however, a complete disregard for Coronial recommendations may leave the party open to public criticism should a repeat incident occur.

In investigating the death of this 20-month-old toddler, it became readily apparent that a number of almost identical instances had gone largely unreported, with no tangible changes effected. I began to research drownings in greater detail, and in compiling the evidence for the Coroner, sought to support the argument for reform with as much logical persuasion as I could generate. The investigation quickly became an obsession, and I found myself in the unusual position of advocating for drowning prevention whilst a member of a law enforcement body. Ultimately my hard work was recognised when the Coroner presiding over the investigation adopted my findings and made strong recommendations to the local government to enact sweeping changes to the way swimming pool safety was administered. The local government adopted all of the recommendations, and I later met with the Minister for Planning and Development to discuss the issues further.



In early 2017 I applied for a Winston Churchill Fellowship to continue my studies into drowning prevention measures. The Fellowship aims to support and reward outstanding Australians, and allow them to conduct further research into a topic of their choice. I was humbled to be awarded a Fellowship later that year and have since travelled to a number of countries in order to conduct further research into drowning prevention.